

Attitudes Towards Work: The Care Arrangements of Couples With Preschool-Aged Children—A European Comparison

Hana Tříšková¹  and Ivett Szalma^{2,3} 

¹ Charles University, Czech Republic

² Institute for Sociology, ELTE Centre for Social Sciences, Hungary

³ Institute of Social and Political Sciences, Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary

Correspondence: Ivett Szalma (szalma.ivett@tk.hu)

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Abstract

Societal expectations in Europe regarding the roles of mothers and fathers in the work and caregiving spheres continue to evolve unevenly. While the labour market participation of women has become widespread, shifts in terms of normative support for paternal caregiving have progressed more slowly, which reflects a persistent cultural lag in the gender revolution process. This study examines public attitudes towards work–care arrangements and preferences for organising work and childcare for preschool-aged children employing data from the 2022 International Social Survey Programme conducted across 16 European countries. Applying multinomial logistic regression models, the analysis compares support for three ideal-typical arrangements—traditional, semi-traditional, and egalitarian—across a range of sociodemographic, attitudinal, and contextual dimensions. The findings reveal pronounced regional patterns: Egalitarian preferences dominate in Nordic countries, semi-traditional models are more prevalent in parts of Central and Southern Europe, and traditional orientations remain dominant in post-socialist contexts. Gender ideology, religiosity, and education comprise the central predictors of support for egalitarian arrangements, while attitudes towards the distribution of paid parental leave further differentiate national profiles. Overall, the results demonstrate that public preferences are shaped by the interplay of cultural norms and institutional conditions, which underscores the tension between advancing structural change and enduring normative expectations that surround parental roles in Europe.

Keywords

Europe; fatherhood; gendered division of labour; normative attitudes; work–care arrangements

1. Introduction

The division of work and caregiving responsibilities with regard to couples with children forms a crucial aspect of family life that is intricately connected to broader social, economic, and cultural frameworks (Craig & van Tienoven, 2021; Cunha & Atalaia, 2019). This issue is of particular importance in Europe, where diverse historical paths, cultural norms, and policy environments lead to significant variations in how couples perceive and manage the balance between employment and caregiving duties (Cunha & Atalaia, 2019; Lomazzi et al., 2019). Forming an understanding of these attitudes is vital in terms of revealing how families perceive the appropriate division of paid work and caregiving, and how these perceptions reflect broader gender norms and institutional constraints (Gaunt & Deutsch, 2024; Lomazzi et al., 2019).

Parental attitudes towards work and care arrangements in Europe reflect a range of approaches shaped by both individual preferences and structural constraints (Hobson & Fahlén, 2009; Lomazzi et al., 2019). Rather than forming in isolation, these attitudes are embedded within societal expectations regarding the gendered division of labour, the availability and design of parental leave schemes, and access to formal childcare services (Javornik & Kurowska, 2017; Mauerer, 2023). In certain contexts, traditional norms continue to emphasise the primary caregiving role of mothers, thus reinforcing gendered labour market engagement and domestic responsibility patterns. Conversely, other European countries have experienced a marked shift towards more egalitarian models, concerning which caregiving and professional work are more evenly distributed between the partners and are supported by progressive policy measures and evolving cultural attitudes (Cunha & Atalaia, 2019; Meil, 2013).

The aim of this article is to conduct a cross-national comparative analysis of the patterns and determinants of the care arrangements of European couples with preschool-aged children. It focuses primarily on the dynamic interplay between individual attitudes, societal norms, and institutional frameworks, and examines the extent to which these factors collectively shape family decision-making processes. By investigating these dimensions, the study seeks to illuminate the mechanisms via which couples adapt to changing economic conditions, policy reforms, and shifting cultural expectations, and offers insights into the diversity of work–family balance strategies across the continent.

Furthermore, the research considers the implications of these care arrangements for gender equality, particularly in terms of how parents share paid work and caregiving responsibilities. It considers how policy environments have the potential to either perpetuate traditional gender disparities or facilitate the more equitable sharing of caregiving responsibilities, thereby influencing both parental well-being and early childhood experiences. Building upon these considerations, the study aims to provide a comprehensive comparative assessment of public preferences regarding parental work–care arrangements across 16 European countries. In specific terms, it examines how individuals evaluate traditional, semi-traditional, and egalitarian models of the organisation of paid work and early childcare, and how these preferences are shaped by socio-demographic characteristics, gender ideology, and attitudes towards parental leave. Via the integration of descriptive analyses, hierarchical cluster techniques, and multinomial regression models, the study seeks to uncover both the individual-level determinants and the broader normative configurations that structure cross-country variations. Applying this approach, the article advances the understanding of the cultural and institutional conditions under which more egalitarian work–care ideals emerge—or persistently fail to take hold—in contemporary Europe.

Ultimately, the study contributes to forming a nuanced understanding of the complex socio-institutional landscape that underpins work–care negotiations by providing evidence-based recommendations for crafting policies that support sustainable and inclusive family practices in diverse European settings. The structure of this article is as follows: The following section presents a theoretical discussion grounded in key concepts such as the gender revolution, evolving gender roles, changing notions of fatherhood, and family policies directed at fathers. This theoretical framework positions attitudes towards parental work–care organisation as a normative indicator of the cultural and institutional climate for fatherhood. Section 3 introduces the data and methods used in the empirical analysis, while Section 4 presents the results based on descriptive statistics, regression models and cluster analysis. This is followed by a discussion that situates the findings within the broader socio-political landscape.

2. Theoretical Concepts

2.1. *Linking Attitudes, Institutions, and Practices*

In order to comprehend paternal involvement in childcare, it is essential to explore the interaction between individual attitudes and the broader institutional and behavioural contexts. Previous research has highlighted the interdependence of these three dimensions—attitudes, institutions, and behaviours—while acknowledging their distinct analytical roles (Lütolf & Stadelmann-Steffen, 2023; Omidakhsh et al., 2020). Institutions define forms of work–care division that are both practically feasible and socially legitimate; attitudes reflect the normative evaluation of these arrangements; and behaviours represent their everyday enactment. From this perspective, attitudes towards parental work–care organisation capture the normative layer of gender relations that mediate between institutional opportunity structures and actual caregiving practices (Edlund & Öun, 2016; Schindler et al., 2025).

Institutions significantly influence societal attitudes in terms of both the feasibility and legitimacy of paternal caregiving. When national policies provide individual, well-compensated, and non-transferable parental leave for men, they not only allocate time for caregiving but also signal that paternal involvement is socially esteemed (Dearing, 2016; Haas & Hwang, 2008). Over time, such policies engender a process of policy feedback, wherein exposure to institutional support alters public expectations concerning the roles of men and women. Conversely, when leave entitlement is brief, insufficiently compensated, or transferable, caregiving continues to be predominantly perceived as maternal work, thereby reinforcing traditional norms (Meil, 2013; Schindler et al., 2025). Thus, policies serve as both material incentives and normative signals that shape collective beliefs concerning gendered caregiving responsibilities.

While institutions delineate potential opportunities, attitudes represent the extent to which individuals internalise or challenge these opportunities. They constitute a component of the cultural framework that either facilitates or restricts behavioural change (Omidakhsh et al., 2020; Schindler et al., 2025). Attitudinal support for paternal involvement establishes the normative foundation upon which policy measures can be developed. In the absence of such support, even substantial leave entitlements or flexible working rights may remain underutilised. Conversely, behavioural changes—such as an increase in the take-up of paternal leave—potentially influence attitudes via exposure effects since visible examples of engaged fatherhood serve to normalise new caregiving patterns (Haas & Hwang, 2008; Kaufman, 2018).

Overall, this indicates that the relationship between attitudes and behaviour is reciprocal, with norms both preceding and following practice. The dynamics in question are evident within historically specific welfare and gender regimes. Nordic welfare contexts often illustrate how supportive policies and egalitarian norms act to reinforce each other, which leads to the widespread acceptance of shared caregiving responsibilities. In contrast, Western Europe, where modified breadwinner models persist, displays more ambivalent attitudes that reflect the coexistence of traditional and egalitarian ideals (Pascall & Lewis, 2004). In many post-socialist and Southern European contexts, shaped by legacies of state-socialist employment or strong familism, normative change tends to occur more slowly despite the introduction of formal policy reforms (Szelewa & Polakowski, 2008). This cross-national variation suggests that the alignment between institutional frameworks and attitudinal models is historically contingent rather than uniform.

2.2. Changing Gender Roles and the Involvement of Fathers

Gender roles, as defined as socially constructed expectations concerning the appropriate behaviour and responsibilities of men and women, have traditionally shaped the distribution of work and care within families (Lomazzi et al., 2019). Conventional gender role attitudes assign domestic and caregiving tasks primarily to women, while men are expected to serve as the main breadwinners (Gornick & Meyers, 2003). In contrast, egalitarian gender role attitudes promote the equal sharing of both paid work and unpaid care, thus challenging the established division of labour (Salin et al., 2018). Although such attitudes exert a strong influence on the decisions couples make with regard to work–care arrangements, practical constraints—such as workplace norms, wage disparities, and the limited availability of childcare—potentially restrict the realisation of egalitarian preferences (Bornatici & Zinn, 2025; Haas & Hwang, 2008).

The evolution of gender role attitudes across European societies reflects broader cultural, generational, and institutional shifts (Knight & Brinton, 2017). At the individual level, education and personal experience often foster more egalitarian outlooks (Boehnke, 2011; Du et al., 2021). At the societal level, entrenched cultural norms, policy environments, and welfare-state configurations contribute to the way in which gender roles are perceived and enacted (Gornick & Meyers, 2003; Pfau-Effinger, 2004). Younger generations tend to express more egalitarian views than older cohorts, thus indicating a gradual shift towards more equal expectations of the roles of men and women in the family context (Boehnke, 2011). Cross-national research has revealed considerable variation: Northern and Western European countries generally exhibit more egalitarian norms and greater institutional support for gender equality, whereas traditional attitudes remain more prevalent in the Southern and Eastern European contexts (Casella et al., 2024; Salin et al., 2018).

These cultural and institutional environments shape attitudes towards parental work–care organisation (Pavolini et al., 2025; Stickney & Konrad, 2012). Moreover, such attitudes reflect both beliefs concerning the extent to which responsibilities should be shared and perceptions of what is feasible within a given societal context (Bornatici & Zinn, 2025; Li et al., 2021; Salin et al., 2018). When paternal caregiving is socially accepted, the perceived social costs of men taking leave or reducing their working hours decline, which facilitates behavioural change and renders shared parenting more realistic (Haas & Hwang, 2008; Rehel, 2014). In contrast, in societies in which traditional norms remain strong, the active participation of men in childcare continues to be viewed as less legitimate or practical, thus leading many couples to adopt more conventional arrangements despite shifting ideals (Burnett et al., 2013; Karu & Kasearu, 2011).

Against this backdrop, the involvement of fathers in childcare has undergone significant transformation (Altintas & Sullivan, 2017). Historically conceptualised primarily as economic providers, fathers are increasingly being seen as active caregivers whose daily engagement plays an essential role in their children's well-being (Beglaubter, 2021; Cabrera et al., 2018). Contemporary fathers are more involved than previously in a wide range of tasks, including feeding, bathing, playing, providing emotional support, and participating in educational activities (Deutsch et al., 2001). This shift is supported by cultural changes that emphasise shared parenting, evolving constructions of masculinity, higher levels of female labour force participation, and improvements to policies that recognise and encourage paternal caregiving (Doucet & McKay, 2020; Novianti & Islami, 2023).

The “new father” ideal captures these evolving expectations by emphasising emotional closeness, nurturing behaviour, the sharing of responsibility for childcare, and a stronger commitment to the work–life balance (McLaughlin & Muldoon, 2014; Offer & Kaplan, 2021). Complementing such behavioural approaches, the concept of “intimate fatherhood” emphasises the emotional engagement of fathers and enhanced relational intensity with their children, thus shifting beyond traditional breadwinner-focused identities (Dermott, 2003; Miller & Dermott, 2015).

Despite the growing endorsement of these ideals, empirical evidence indicates that a gap persists between normative expectations and everyday practice. Persistent traditional norms, workplace cultures that prioritise uninterrupted employment, and institutional barriers often limit the capacity of fathers to engage in childcare to the extent they would wish (Henwood & Procter, 2003; Offer & Kaplan, 2021). As a result, the involvement of fathers continues to vary significantly across European countries (Altintas & Sullivan, 2017). Paternal involvement tends to be higher in Northern and Western European countries, where egalitarian gender role attitudes are widespread and supportive policies—such as paternity leave, parental leave for fathers, and accessible childcare—are well established, than in Southern and Eastern European countries, where persistent traditional norms and weaker policy support result in lower levels of paternal engagement and the more pronounced gendered division of care (Altintas & Sullivan, 2017; Javornik & Kurowska, 2017).

Overall, the increasing involvement of fathers in childcare forms a central component of ongoing changes in gender roles across Europe. Active fatherhood contributes to more balanced work–care arrangements within couples, enhances family dynamics, and supports the emotional and social development of children. As cultural norms continue to evolve and institutional support expands, the role of fathers is increasingly being recognised as integral to both family well-being and broader societal progress toward gender equality.

2.3. Family Policies and Welfare Regimes

Paid leave, which is designed to enable parents to reconcile paid employment with early-years caregiving while shaping societal expectations concerning gender roles, constitutes one of the core elements of contemporary family-policy regimes (Hsiao, 2023; Thévenon, 2011). Policies regarding paternal leave have gained significant attention as research increasingly highlights the role of fathers in the sharing of child-rearing duties (Duvander et al., 2021; Lütolf, 2025); moreover, as societal norms continue to shift, increasing recognition is evident of the benefits of the active involvement of fathers in terms of both the well-being of their children and gender equality (Baird et al., 2021; Rollè et al., 2019).

Empirical research across multiple national contexts has demonstrated that the institutional design of parental leave policies—specifically the presence of individualised, non-transferable entitlement reserved for fathers, often termed the “father’s quota”—constitutes the most consequential policy lever in terms of increasing the uptake of paternal leave and reshaping the gendered division of early childcare (Castro-García & Pazos-Moran, 2016; Haas & Rostgaard, 2011). When leave is explicitly earmarked for fathers and structured on a “use-it-or-lose-it” basis, the uptake of leave by fathers increases substantially (Duvander & Johansson, 2019; Lütolf, 2025). The quota removes the need for negotiation with mothers and provides fathers with institutional legitimacy in terms of signalling that they are competent caregivers that deserve protected time with their children (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012; Lütolf, 2025). This policy design approach challenges deeply embedded cultural norms that historically positioned motherhood as the primary caregiving role and fatherhood as secondary (Dobrotić & Stropnik, 2020). In contrast, leave systems that allow for flexibility or full transferability between parents tend to perpetuate traditional roles since mothers claim most of the available entitlements while fathers, who lack explicit institutional encouragement, often opt out of taking leave altogether (Dearing, 2016; Haas & Rostgaard, 2011).

Nordic countries—Sweden, Norway, Iceland, and Finland—have pioneered the most developed models in this respect (Haas & Rostgaard, 2011; Rostgaard & Ejrnæs, 2021), combining substantial, earnings-related, non-transferable father’s quotas with robust income replacement (Haas & Rostgaard, 2011; Ray et al., 2010) and deliberate normative campaigns that aim to promote shared caregiving as a marker of gender equality (Haas & Hwang, 2008; Rostgaard & Ejrnæs, 2021).

Western European countries such as Germany, France, and the United Kingdom feature more mixed configurations. Although several systems have progressed towards gender-equality objectives, elements of the modified breadwinner model persist, which has resulted in the weakening of incentives for the uptake of paternal leave (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012; Lewis & Campbell, 2007). In most post-socialist European states, although women participate to a significant extent in the labour market, the design of parental-leave programmes creates a stark mismatch between the duration of entitlement and the generosity of compensation. These countries typically provide very long entitlement periods—often three years or more—but couple them with modest, flat-rate wage replacement rates that render leave financially unattractive for fathers, particularly in the context of persistent gender wage gaps and the higher average earnings of men (Fodor et al., 2002; Szelewa & Polakowski, 2008). Similarly, the strongly familialist welfare regimes of Southern Europe continue to provide minimal father-specific leave entitlements, with correspondingly low uptake rates (Craig & Mullan, 2011; Tanturri et al., 2020; Ray et al., 2010). Table 1 in the Supplementary File provides an overview of the provision of father-specific leave across Europe in 2022.

It is not possible to form a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness and feasibility of father-oriented leave policies without considering labour market structures. The availability of part-time employment and flexible working arrangements plays a crucial role in terms of determining the capacity of parents to share caregiving responsibilities. In 2024, male part-time employment stood at approximately 20% in Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands, compared to less than 10% in Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland; concerning mothers of children under six years of age, however, the rates exceeded 60% and were below 10%, respectively (Eurostat, 2025a). These figures illustrate the significant cross-national differences in labour market structures. These structural differences significantly influence the uptake of leave and the perceived feasibility of gender-equal arrangements (Omidakhsh et al., 2020). Consequently, even

well-designed leave policies do not necessarily lead to behavioural changes if broader labour market conditions continue to position caregiving primarily as a maternal responsibility (see Supplementary File, Table 2; Gehringer & Klasen, 2017).

Attitudinal patterns towards the involvement of fathers are also shaped by the afore-mentioned institutional and structural contexts. Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behaviour posits that attitudes constitute merely one aspect of behavioural intentions; perceptions of feasibility and opportunity are equally significant. This helps to explain why egalitarian work-care preferences are more common in Scandinavian countries, where policies and labour market structures act to support feasibility, and less common in post-socialist contexts, where gender-equal arrangements are perceived as less attainable (André et al., 2025; Sjöberg, 2004). Table 2 in the Supplementary File provides a summary of these cross-national labour-market patterns.

3. Data and Methods

3.1. Data

This article employs data from the Family and Changing Gender Roles V module of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) from 2022, which provides extensive insights into societal perceptions of gender roles in both the public and private spheres, as well as attitudes towards parenthood, the work-life balance, gender equality, and the division of domestic and childcare responsibilities. In comparison to previous years, the module was expanded so as to encompass multiple enquiries—for example, a battery of questions on specific childcare tasks and their allocation between mothers and fathers. The module provides valuable insights into social norms surrounding family life and gender relations and the extent to which these evolve across both time and cultural contexts. Applying descriptive statistics, we explored individual attitudes to the topic of preferred work-care arrangements in families with a preschool-aged child. The following countries were analysed: Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Hungary, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Switzerland. The descriptive statistics of the variables employed are reported in Table 1. Our final sample consisted of 15,419 respondents, of whom 7,244 were men and 8,175 women.

3.2. Variables

3.2.1. Dependent Variable

The dependent variable, the preferred work-care arrangements of couples with a preschool-aged child, captured the normative views of the respondents on how parents should organise paid work and childcare. Based on the ISSP item "Consider a family with a child under school age. What, in your opinion, is the best way for them to organise their family and work life?" the responses were recoded into three categories that reflected the degree of gender specialisations in parental roles. The traditional model referred to arrangements wherein the mother stays at home and the father works full-time. The semi-traditional model covered situations in which the mother works part-time while the father remains in full-time employment, which reflected partial convergence towards the dual-earner model. Finally, the egalitarian model referred to all arrangements in which both parents participate in paid work—either full-time or part-time—or where the father assumes the main caregiving role. While the item refers to how parents should organise paid work

and childcare, we interpreted the responses as a normative indicator of the extent to which caregiving and breadwinning responsibilities are expected to be divided between mothers and fathers, given that paid working hours implicitly signal assumptions about the allocation of childcare, while acknowledging that paid working time is an imperfect proxy for actual caregiving time.

3.2.2. Independent Variables

The independent socio-demographic variables included sex, age, education, employment status, and partnership status. Sex was coded as a binary variable (0 = male, 1 = female), with men serving as the reference category. Age was grouped into six categories (15–24, 25–34, 35–44, 45–54, 55–64, and 65+ years) so as to capture potential generational and life-course differences in gender role attitudes; the youngest group (15–24) was considered to be the reference category. Educational attainment was split into three levels—primary, secondary, and tertiary—with primary education considered to be the reference category. Employment status was measured via three categories: in paid work, not in paid work, and retired; the respondents in paid work formed the reference group aimed at assessing differences between the active, non-active, and retired populations. Partnership status was derived from the living in a steady partnership variable and comprised three categories: living with a partner in the same household, having a partner but living separately, and no partner. Respondents with a partner served as the reference group in the regression model aimed at assessing the impact of partnership and cohabitation on gender role preferences.

Religiosity was measured via attendance at religious services, an approach that better reflects active religious practice than formal affiliation. Responses were recoded into three categories: frequent attendance (several times per month or more), occasional attendance (several times per year or once per year), and never. Those who frequently attend religious services served as the reference group aimed at capturing differences in moral and cultural orientations towards gender and family roles. Respondents without any religious affiliation and those who did not report their religious affiliation were excluded from the analysis. Parental status was measured by the number of children and categorised as childless, one child, two children, and three or more children. Childless individuals served as the baseline category, thus allowing for the assessment of how direct parental experience shapes attitudes towards work and care arrangements.

The financial difficulty variable was derived from the survey question: “Thinking about your household’s total income, including all the sources of income of all the members who contribute to it, how difficult or easy is it currently for your household to make ends meet?” The responses were recoded into three categories that reflected the perceived financial situation of the respondents: financially strained (difficulty making ends meet), neutral (neither easy nor difficult), and financially comfortable (little to no difficulty). This variable captured the subjective economic well-being of households, complemented the objective socio-demographic indicators, and allowed for the assessment of the extent to which economic security shapes work–care arrangement preferences.

The preferred division of paid parental leave variable was based on the survey item that explicitly referred to a “hypothetical couple” described in the preceding question—namely, a couple in which both partners work full-time and have a newborn child. The item asked: “Still thinking about the same couple, if both are in a similar work situation and are eligible for paid leave, how should this paid leave period be divided between the mother and the father?” The responses were grouped into four categories that reflected increasing gender

equality with regard to leave preferences: no paid leave, mother-only leave (the mother takes the entire leave period), mother-majority leave (the mother takes most and the father some), and equal or father-majority leave (parents share equally, or the father takes most or all of the leave). The mother-only leave category served as the reference group. This variable captured policy-related gender norms and provided a complementary measure of attitudes towards the division of paid and unpaid care work.

With respect to the measurement of the attitudes of the respondents towards gender and family roles, two composite indices were constructed from a battery of six Likert-type items that captured views on the employment of women and the gendered division of labour. Respondents indicated their agreement with each statement according to a 5-point scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The principal component analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation revealed a robust two-factor solution consistent with theoretical expectations.

The first component, labelled Women's Employment, reflected attitudes towards the compatibility of maternal employment with family life. It comprised three items: (a) "A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work" (reverse-coded), (b) "A preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works," and (c) "Family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job." The index was computed as the mean score of the three items. Aimed at addressing the issue of missing data, we applied the MEAN.2 function in SPSS, which retained those respondents that provided valid answers for at least two of the three items. This approach served to preserve the quality of the measurement process while avoiding unnecessary case deletion. Higher values indicated more traditional attitudes towards maternal employment.

The second component, labelled Gender Roles, captured beliefs regarding the appropriate division of labour between men and women. It consisted of three items: (a) "What women really want is a home and children," (b) "Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay," and (c) "A man's job is to earn money; a woman's job is to look after the home and family." The PCA confirmed that the three items loaded strongly upon a single underlying dimension, thus indicating a clear unidimensional structure. Internal consistency was acceptable given the brevity of the scale (Cronbach's $\alpha \approx .70$ across countries). In order to maximise the number of valid cases while maintaining measurement reliability, the index was computed as the mean score across the three items and required at least two valid responses per respondent. Higher index values indicated more traditional attitudes. This item captured one of the key dimensions of gender ideology—norms concerning the paid work of women and expectations surrounding gendered family roles—which was central to the theoretical framework of this study.

The cluster solution was predicated on employing a set of attitudinal indicators that encapsulated the broader normative context surrounding the organisation of parental work and care. The variables included reflected key gender ideology and caregiving norm dimensions: attitudes towards gender roles, attitudes towards the employment of women, and the preferred division of paid parental leave. Collectively, these indicators provided for the multidimensional representation of cultural expectations surrounding parental roles.

The three resulting clusters represented empirically derived public attitude configurations rather than predefined regional groupings. The clusters comprised countries that demonstrated similar orientations towards gender, work, and caregiving regardless of their geographical proximity or historical connections.

This data-driven classification approach was subsequently applied as a categorical predictor in the regression models, with Cluster 1 serving as the reference category.

The clusters were as follows:

- Cluster 1 (high-egalitarian norms): Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, and Switzerland;
- Cluster 2 (moderate traditional norms): Italy, Poland, and Slovenia;
- Cluster 3 (strongly gender-traditional norms): Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, and Slovakia.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the dependent and independent variables, 2022.

Dependent variable	N	%
Preferred work-care arrangement model		
Traditional	2,601	16.9%
Semi-traditional	5,679	36.8%
Egalitarian	7,139	46.3%
Independent variables		
Country		
Austria	762	4.9%
Czech Republic	936	6.1%
Denmark	853	5.5%
Finland	827	5.4%
France	1,418	9.2%
Germany	1,052	6.8%
Hungary	973	6.3%
Iceland	739	4.8%
Italy	796	5.2%
Lithuania	960	6.2%
Netherlands	982	6.4%
Norway	723	4.7%
Poland	885	5.7%
Slovakia	785	5.1%
Slovenia	915	5.9%
Switzerland	1,814	11.8%
Sex		
Male	7,244	47.0%
Female	8,175	53.0%
Age		
15-24	1,132	7.3%
25-34	2,188	14.2%
35-44	2,560	16.6%
45-54	2,681	17.4%
55-64	2,845	18.5%
65+	4,012	26.0%
Education		
Primary	2,255	14.6%
Secondary	7,281	47.2%
Tertiary	5,883	38.2%

Table 1. (Cont.) Descriptive statistics for the dependent and independent variables, 2022.

Dependent variable	N	%
Independent variables		
Paid work status		
In paid work	9,237	59.9%
Not in paid work	2,383	15.5%
Retired	3,799	24.6%
Partnership status		
Living with partner	10,038	65.1%
Partnered but not cohabiting	998	6.5%
No partner	4,382	28.4%
Attendance of religious service		
Frequent	1,822	11.8%
Occasional	5,041	32.7%
Rarely or never	8,557	55.5%
Number of children		
Childless	4,082	26.5%
One child	2,631	17.1%
Two children	5,292	34.3%
Three or more children	3,414	22.1%
Paid leave division		
No paid leave	934	6.1%
Mother-only leave	2,268	14.7%
Mother majority	5,888	38.2%
Equal/Father majority/Father-only leave	6,329	41.0%
Financial difficulty		
Financially strained	3,631	23.6%
Neutral	5,637	36.6%
Financially comfortable	6,150	39.9%
N	15,419	100.0%

Source: ISSP Research Group (2025).

3.3. Methods

We applied multinomial logistic regression aimed at examining the extent to which socio-demographic, attitudinal, and contextual factors shape preferences concerning differing work-care arrangements. Since the dependent variable consisted of three nominal categories, this method allowed us to estimate the probability of selecting each of the arrangements relative to the traditional model. Aimed at facilitating the interpretation, the results were presented as average marginal effects (AMEs), which expressed how the individual predictors changed the likelihood of preferring the semi-traditional or egalitarian model.

We estimated three multinomial logistic regression models in a stepwise manner in order to analyse preferences concerning parental work-care arrangements. Model 1 included only the core sociodemographic characteristics so as to capture how individual life circumstances shape preferences. Model 2 added attitudinal variables related to gender ideology—views on the employment of women, traditional gender roles, and preferred parental leave arrangements—in order to assess the explanatory

power of the normative orientations. Model 3 incorporated contextual and structural factors—country-cluster membership, religious practice, and economic situation indicators—aimed at evaluating the extent to which broader cultural and institutional environments influence work-care preferences beyond individual characteristics and attitudes.

We complemented the regression analysis with a hierarchical cluster analysis that grouped the studied countries according to their attitudinal profiles in order to capture broader cross-national patterns. This data-driven typology provided for a more nuanced understanding of cross-country variations than predefined geographical or welfare-state classifications.

Any missing values were handled via listwise deletion. The analytical sample therefore included all the respondents with valid data on the variables applied in the models.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Results

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of preferred parental work-care arrangements across the 16 European countries included in the analysis. The findings indicate significant cross-national variation, with each of the three models—traditional, semi-traditional, and egalitarian—emerging as the predominant preference in different national contexts.

The egalitarian model—characterised by the equal sharing of paid employment and childcare responsibilities—received the highest level of endorsement in most of the Western and Nordic countries. This preference was particularly strong in Norway (69.3%), followed by Iceland (68.5%), the Netherlands (65.5%), Finland (64.7%), France (64.3%), Denmark (59.9%), and Switzerland (59.1%). While the Nordic countries are typically associated with dual-earner/dual-carer policies and the extensive provision of public childcare services, the Netherlands and Switzerland represent a somewhat different context in which the part-time employment of mothers is common and policy support for fully-shared caregiving is relatively limited. Nevertheless, egalitarian attitudes were found to be common in both these countries, which suggests a normative shift towards greater gender equality even in contexts in which institutional arrangements continue to encourage part-time maternal employment. In contrast, the semi-traditional model, in which mothers participate in paid work but do not occupy the position of the main earner while fathers maintain the primary breadwinner role, is the most favoured arrangement in several Central, Southern, and Western European countries. This preference is particularly evident in Italy (54.0%), followed by Austria (53.5%), Lithuania (51.5%), Germany (46.6%), Slovenia (45.0%), and Hungary (40.0%). These patterns indicate a preference for modified male-breadwinner models wherein maternal employment is accepted, yet mothers are still expected to prioritise caregiving responsibilities, particularly concerning young children.

While the traditional model, wherein mothers remain at home full-time, is the predominant preference only in Slovakia (38.7%), it nevertheless receives relatively strong support in several other post-socialist countries, including Hungary (37.0%), the Czech Republic (33.2%), and Poland (32.6%). These findings suggest that traditional expectations of maternal care are more enduring in Central and Eastern Europe, in line with the

historical legacies of state-socialist family policies that integrated high female employment with persistent gendered expectations regarding caregiving.

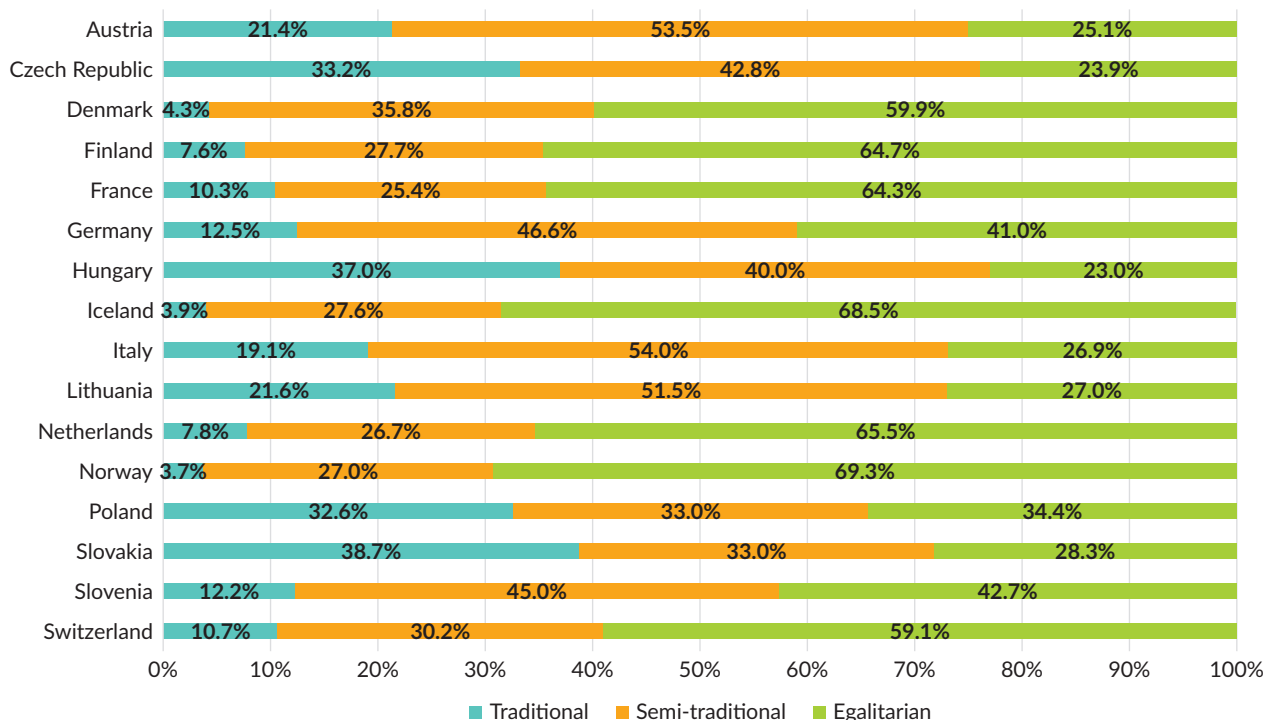


Figure 1. Perception of the preferred parental childcare model, 2022, in %. Source: ISSP Research Group (2025).

In summary, the descriptive findings indicate broad cross-national tendencies that partly resemble regional patterns: Egalitarian preferences are more often predominant in Nordic and Western European countries, semi-traditional preferences are prevalent in parts of Central and Southern Europe, and traditional preferences are more evident in post-socialist contexts. These patterns are closely aligned with established theoretical frameworks concerning gender regimes, welfare-state configurations, and the institutional organisation of childcare. Countries with robust public childcare systems and gender-equality-oriented policies tend to endorse the equal distribution of work and caregiving responsibilities, whereas contexts with less developed childcare infrastructures or more traditional cultural norms continue to favour arrangements that assign greater caregiving responsibilities to mothers. This cross-country variation underscores the significance of institutional and normative environments in terms of shaping the perceptions of individuals concerning the ideal organisation of parental care.

4.2. Cluster Analysis Results: Parental Role Attitude Patterns Across the 16 European Countries Considered

A hierarchical cluster analysis was conducted aimed at identifying natural groupings of countries based on similarities in terms of attitudinal profiles across the 16 European countries considered in this study. This method allows for the detection of underlying patterns without imposing any predetermined regional or institutional classifications. The resulting dendrogram (see Figure 2 in the Supplementary File) illustrates the

relational structure of the countries and reveals how they cluster into relatively homogeneous groups; the height of the branches indicates the degree of attitudinal dissimilarity.

The analysis resulted in a three-cluster solution. The first cluster comprised Austria, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany, Norway, Denmark, Finland, France, and Iceland. Despite their institutional differences, these countries exhibited relatively egalitarian attitudes towards gender roles, the widespread acceptance of maternal employment, and robust support for more gender-balanced parental leave arrangements. The close grouping of these countries reflected their broadly similar normative orientations towards dual-earner/dual-carer family models, often—but not uniformly—associated with more gender-egalitarian welfare contexts.

The second cluster comprised Italy, Poland, and Slovenia. These countries demonstrated moderately traditional gender-role orientations, placed greater emphasis on maternal caregiving, and exhibited somewhat weaker public support for the full-time employment of women. Despite divergent historical and welfare trajectories, they converged in terms of attitudes that favour the more gendered division of early childcare responsibilities. This cluster occupied an intermediate normative position between the egalitarian orientation of Cluster 1 and the more traditional pattern observed for Cluster 3.

The third cluster consisted of Hungary, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. These countries exhibited the most traditional attitudinal profiles, characterised by a pronounced preference for maternal caregiving and relatively conservative perspectives on gender roles and the division of parental leave. Public attitudes in this cluster placed a greater normative emphasis on mothers as the primary caregivers accompanied by the lower acceptance of equal or father-inclusive leave arrangements.

The three-cluster solution effectively captured distinct normative models concerning parental work and caregiving across Europe. These clusters underscore significant cross-national variations in gender ideologies and caregiving expectations, and provide a valuable typology for forming an understanding of how broader societal contexts influence public perceptions of the appropriate roles of mothers and fathers in early childcare.

4.3. Multivariate Analysis: Predictors of Preferred Work–Care Arrangements

Three multinomial logistic regression models were assessed, applying the traditional model as the reference category. Aimed at facilitating interpretation, the results were presented as AMEs that showed the extent to which individual characteristics impact the probability of preferring either the semi-traditional or the egalitarian models over the traditional model (see Table 2)

4.3.1. Model 1: Sociodemographic Predictors

Model 1, which incorporated only the core sociodemographic variables, indicated that gender, age, and education significantly influence work–care arrangement preferences. Women were more likely to endorse both the semi-traditional and the egalitarian models than men. Age differences reflected a clear generational gradient: Younger respondents were observed to be more supportive of egalitarian arrangements than the older cohorts, who tended to express a preference for more gender-specialised models.

Education also played a significant role. Individuals with a secondary education were found to be more supportive of the non-traditional models than those with lower educational attainment; moreover, the tertiary-educated respondents expressed a pronounced preference for the egalitarian model, thus indicating that higher educational attainment is particularly associated with support for fully gender-equal arrangements.

The influence of the number of children was less pronounced but remained steady. As the number of children increases, a decline is evident in terms of support for the egalitarian model, with a shift in preferences towards semi-traditional or traditional setups. With respect to partnership status, individuals without a partner tended to favour the traditional model and were less inclined towards alternative arrangements; however, this factor exerted only a minor impact.

4.3.2. Model 2: Gender Ideology and Parental Leave Preferences

The introduction of attitudes towards gender roles, the employment of women, and the preferred division of paid parental leave substantially enhanced the explanatory power of the model. Egalitarian gender-role attitudes and support for the employment of women significantly increased the likelihood of a preference for the egalitarian model and decreased support for semi-traditional arrangements.

With respect to preferences regarding paid parental leave, those respondents that favoured equal or father-inclusive leave arrangements were more likely to support the egalitarian model, whereas those that preferred mother-only or mother-majority leave tended to select the semi-traditional model. The inclusion of these attitudinal variables acted to reduce the strength of many of the sociodemographic predictors, thus suggesting that values and normative orientations act to mediate their influence.

4.3.3. Model 3: Contextual and Economic Predictors

Model 3 further included the variables that captured economic conditions, labour-market status, religiosity, and country-cluster membership. Those respondents that were not employed or were retired exhibited a slightly greater probability of preferring the non-traditional models than those in paid work, though the effects were modest.

Perceived financial well-being acted to increase support for egalitarian arrangements and to reduce support for the semi-traditional model, thus indicating that economic security facilitates preferences for the equal sharing of work and care.

The country clusters exhibited strong and consistent effects: Individuals that resided in countries with more traditional gender norms were significantly more likely to support the semi-traditional or traditional models and less likely to endorse the egalitarian model.

Attendance of religious service was also a significant predictor; those respondents who attended religious services infrequently or never were found to be more likely to prefer egalitarian arrangements and less likely to favour the semi-traditional model than frequent religious service attendees.

Notably, these contextual factors retained their significance even when controlling for gender ideology and sociodemographic characteristics, which indicated that work–care model preferences emerge from the interaction of individual beliefs, lived experiences, and the cultural and institutional context.

The analysis across all three models indicated that preferences regarding parental work–care arrangements are influenced by a combination of sociodemographic factors, gender-related attitudes, and broader contextual influences. While women, younger persons, and those with a higher educational attainment tended to favour egalitarian arrangements, these effects weakened once gender ideology and parental-leave beliefs were taken into account. Rather, attitudes towards maternal employment, gender roles, and the division of parental leave emerged as the strongest predictors. Contextual factors—such as financial security, religiosity, and country-level gender norms—further differentiated the preferences of the respondents, which underscored the fact that ideals regarding work–care arrangements reflect both individual orientations and the broader normative environment.

Table 2. AMEs that predicted preferred work–care arrangement.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Semi-traditional	Egalitarian	Semi-traditional	Egalitarian	Semi-traditional	Egalitarian
Sex	0.0198***	0.0121***	0.0334**	−0.0252*	0.0311***	−0.0182***
Age						
25–34	0.0042***	−0.0764***	−0.0260**	−0.0094**	0.0360***	0.00035
35–44	0.0089**	−0.0645***	−0.0101*	−0.0149**	0.0275***	−0.00458***
45–54	−0.0018**	−0.0575***	−0.0119*	−0.0164*	0.0327***	−0.00670***
55–64	0.0032	−0.0391**	0.001	−0.0128*	0.0151**	0.00862***
65+	0.0317	−0.0656**	0.02198***	−0.0236***	−0.00657***	−0.0388***
Education						
Secondary	0.0263***	0.0504***	0.0139***	−0.0113	−0.0183**	0.0687***
Tertiary	−0.0654***	0.2574***	−0.0189***	0.0747***	−0.0462***	0.2574***
Number of children						
One child	0.0644	−0.1069***	0.0357***	−0.0411***	0.00216	−0.0329***
Two children	0.0602	−0.0994***	0.0252***	−0.0316***	0.00289	−0.0216***
Three or more children	0.0256**	−0.0772***	−0.0006	−0.0160***	0.0140***	−0.00977***
Partnership status						
Partnered but not cohabiting	0.0177	0.0182	−0.0094	−0.0088	0.0222**	−0.0166***
No partner	−0.0152***	−0.0127***	−0.0223*	0.01295	0.00306	0.0192***
Paid leave division						
Mother-only leave			−0.0732***	0.2051***	−0.1064***	0.1636***
Mother majority			0.1463***	0.0475***	−0.1718***	0.0218***
Equal/Father majority/ Father-only leave			−0.0437***	0.2722***	−0.2046***	0.2346***

Table 2. (Cont.) AMEs that predicted preferred work–care arrangement.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Semi-traditional	Egalitarian	Semi-traditional	Egalitarian	Semi-traditional	Egalitarian
Women employment			−0.0549***	0.1023***	−0.0477***	0.0983***
Gender roles			−0.0304***	0.0939***	−0.0593***	0.0792***
Paid work						
Not in paid work					0.0152***	0.0192***
Retired					0.0199***	0.0229***
Financial difficulty						
Neutral					−0.0162***	0.00788***
Financially comfortable					−0.0260***	0.0299***
Clusters						
Moderately Traditional Norms					0.0257***	−0.0523***
Strongly Gender-Traditional Norms					0.0303***	−0.0591***
Attendance of religious service						
Occasional					−0.0394***	0.0141***
Rarely or never					−0.0228***	0.0661***
Nagelkerke R^2	0.082		0.390		0.400	

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. Source: ISSP Research Group (2025).

5. Conclusion

This study examined public preferences with respect to parental work–care arrangements in 16 European countries applying descriptive analyses, hierarchical clustering, and multinomial regression. Drawing on theoretical perspectives regarding the gender revolution, the interaction between attitudes, institutions, and behaviour, and the evolving ideals of fatherhood, the findings underscored the extent to which normative expectations concerning caregiving roles continue to influence the perceived legitimacy and feasibility of work–care arrangements.

The descriptive findings revealed significant cross-national variations that closely reflected differences in the institutional opportunity structures. Egalitarian preferences were most common in Nordic and most Western European contexts, where established dual-earner/dual-carer policies, shorter working hours, and well-developed childcare systems create institutional conditions that render shared caregiving feasible. In contrast, semi-traditional preferences prevailed in parts of Central and Southern Europe, which reflected welfare contexts in which maternal employment is accepted, yet institutional arrangements continue to promote modified breadwinner models. Traditional preferences were strongest in post-socialist countries, consistent with enduring cultural legacies that valorise maternal caregiving despite high female employment.

This result was consistent with findings from previous comparative empirical research (Fodor et al., 2002; Javornik & Kurowska, 2017; Szelewa & Polakowski, 2008)

The cluster analysis confirmed the theoretical expectation that attitudes are not necessarily confined by geographical boundaries; rather, they align with broader normative regimes. The three clusters represented distinct normative configurations: a highly egalitarian cluster, a moderately traditional cluster, and a strongly gender-traditional cluster. These patterns reflected previous findings that the design of institutional policies plays a significant role in terms of shaping the legitimacy of paternal caregiving roles (Haas & Hwang, 2008). The fact that countries with very different welfare histories clustered together attitudinally further highlighted the significance of cultural path-dependencies and shared gender ideologies beyond formal policy frameworks.

The multivariate analysis revealed that sociodemographic factors alone only partially account for support for various work–care arrangements. When gender ideology and parental-leave preferences are considered, these attitudinal factors emerge as central predictors, thus affirming theoretical arguments that attitudes shape—and often limit—the behavioural adoption of egalitarian policies. Support for the employment of women, the rejection of traditional gender roles, and the endorsement of equal or father-inclusive leave arrangements significantly bolster support for egalitarian work–care models. This finding aligns with the theoretical emphasis on attitudes as the normative layer that mediates the connection between institutional opportunities and actual behaviours (Lomazzi et al., 2019). Contextual influences, e.g., attendance of religious service, financial well-being, and country-cluster membership, further confirmed that preferences are embedded within broader cultural and institutional environments, which is consistent with the literature on welfare-state regimes and policy feedback (Pascall & Lewis, 2004).

Overall, the findings indicated a persistent cultural lag in the gender revolution. Although maternal employment is largely normalised across Europe, normative support for fully-shared caregiving lags behind, particularly in contexts in which institutional environments do not strongly encourage paternal involvement (Altintas & Sullivan, 2017; Offer & Kaplan, 2021). In many countries, the semi-traditional model seems to serve as a negotiated compromise between traditional gender norms and contemporary labour market demands. Simultaneously, the rise of egalitarian attitudes—especially among younger, more highly-educated, and gender-egalitarian individuals—reflects ongoing cultural shifts consistent with transformations in fatherhood ideals and the gradual diffusion of the “new father” norm.

This study provides a contribution to the broader debate on gender equality, fatherhood, and the organisation of care by demonstrating that public preferences continue to be shaped by the interplay of structural opportunities, cultural legacies, and normative expectations. Policy reforms that aim to promote more gender-equal caregiving—such as non-transferable father-specific leave, high-quality childcare provision, or public campaigns that aim to normalise paternal involvement—are likely to be most effective when they align with or actively reshape prevailing cultural norms. Future research should investigate the extent to which these attitudinal patterns translate into actual behavioural change and how evolving policy designs interact with shifting social expectations over time. As demographic pressures and persistent gender inequalities remain central policy concerns across Europe, forming a detailed understanding of how citizens evaluate work–care arrangements is essential in terms of designing effective and equitable family policies.

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Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Ulf R. Hedetoft (University of Copenhagen).

Data Availability

The data used in this study are available from the GESIS Data Archive (ISSP Research Group, 2025).

LLMs Disclosure

The authors used the subscription-based version of ChatGPT (OpenAI) to review the manuscript for grammar and style. ChatGPT was used exclusively for language editing purposes and not for any other aspect of the manuscript.

Supplementary Material

The supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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About the Authors



Hana Tříšková is a PhD student in demography at the Faculty of Science of Charles University. Her research focuses on the reproductive plans of men and women in Central and Eastern European countries, the involvement of fathers in childcare, family policies, the economic conditions of households, and labour market inequalities.



Ivett Szalma (PhD) is a research chair at the ELTE Centre for Social Sciences, where she leads the “Momentum” Reproductive Sociology Research Group. She is also an associate professor at Corvinus University of Budapest. Her research focuses on childlessness, attitudes toward same-sex couples, and assisted reproduction. Her most recent publications include “Measuring Attitudes Towards Voluntary Childlessness: Indicators in European Comparative Surveys” (with M. Heers and M. L. Tanturri) and “The Impact of Political-Demographic Considerations on European Attitudes Towards Parenting and Adoption by Same-Sex Couples” (with J. Takács).